

VZCZCXRO0360

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DE RUEHIT #0468/01 2410858  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 280858Z AUG 08  
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8430  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC  
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000468

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL BRANCH OF NATIONALIST ACTION PARTY LOOKS  
TO THE WEST

REF: A. ISTANBUL 395

[B](#). 07 ANKARA 2041

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Ihsan Barutcu, Istanbul chair of the National Action Party (MHP), along with his deputy -- Nazme Celenk, and Mithat Melen, MHP MP from Istanbul, all welcomed greater cooperation with the United States in recent conversations with us. All three MHP officials stated Turkey must look west, especially for economic development. Barutcu appreciated U.S. help in combating the terrorist PKK, which he described as the greatest problem facing Turkey. Melen, a self described MHP "maverick," criticized the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for an ambiguous response to U.S. requests for support prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq; he fears AKP is repeating this error today with regard to Iran. End Summary.

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Turkey's Western Orientation  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Ihsan Barutcu, MHP's Istanbul chairman, welcomed greater cooperation with the United States, pointing out Turkey's foreign policy interests often coincide with U.S. policy. Barutcu supports economic sanctions against Iran and continued pressure on Iran to stop its nuclear weapons program. Barutcu is also concerned Syria is a "Middle East problem" that could spill into Turkey. MHP Istanbul deputy chairman Nazme Celenk stressed the Turkish Republic has always looked West since its formation in 1923. Eastern countries such as Russia and China, along with Middle Eastern countries, should not be the focus of Turkish foreign policy, he argued. In a separate meeting, Mithat Melen, MHP deputy for Istanbul's second district, also argued Turkey's future lies with the West. Melen, professor of economics at Middle Eastern Technical University and a regular columnist on economic issues, told us Turkey's future can never be with the Middle East, since the path to economic prosperity clearly lies with interacting with the West.

[1](#)3. (SBU) While Barutcu and Celenk valued Turkey's economic engagement with the EU, both argued Turkey should not move toward the EU because "the EU does not want Turkey as a full member". Celenk suggested instead Turkey should become a special partner with the EU, a status that would provide economic benefits while preserving Turkey's sovereignty. Given hostile comments from some EU leaders, Turkey should partner instead with the United States, according to Celenk. Melen was vague on the issue of EU membership, but supports EU-mandated free market reforms. He praised AKP's earlier successes with economic reforms, but claimed the party's

focus has turned to social issues, like the headscarf ban. EU nations are also guilty of ignoring the positive economic benefits of greater cooperation with Turkey by concentrating on social problems in Turkey, such as the reopening of Halki Seminary and the Armenian issue, he argued.

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PKK, Iraq, Iran, and Relations with the U.S.  
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¶4. (SBU) Separatist terror activity is the greatest threat facing Turkey today, a threat MHP takes more seriously than any other party, according to Barutcu. It was MHP's strong stance against terrorism, particularly against the PKK, that allowed MHP to cross the 10 percent threshold for representation in Parliament in the 2007 elections, he claimed. Barutcu pointed to the ceremony for the victims of the July 27 Istanbul bombings (reftel A) as underscoring the tragic results of terrorism. Accepting our condolences for the victims of the attack, Barutcu said he looked forward to greater cooperation between Turkey and the U.S. in combating terrorism.

¶5. (SBU) Melen pointed to Turkey's failure to support U.S. operations in Iraq as a significant cause of the poor relations between the two countries. In 2003, AKP's inexperience led it to promise Turkey's support, yet it failed to deliver on the March 1 vote, he explained. An MHP administration would have been clear where it stood, avoiding a diplomatic disaster by letting the Americans know beforehand that Turkey would not serve as a base for

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operations against Iraq. Melen sees a similar problem occurring with a hypothetical attack on Iran; AKP should be clear to the United States that Turkish territory is off limits in any attack on Iran.

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Domestic Issues  
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¶6. (SBU) Barutcu said he was disappointed by the Constitutional Court's June 5 annulment of constitutional amendments aimed at lifting the headscarf ban at universities - legislation MHP joined AKP in supporting. The amendments represented a good compromise that best reflected all sectors of Turkish society, Barutcu explained. While the court's ruling means tensions over the headscarf ban will continue to simmer, Barutcu said everyone must respect the verdict.

¶7. (SBU) Barutcu supported the investigation against the alleged Ergenekon coup plotters, adding there are groups that would thwart democracy in Turkey for political gain. The government should take strong actions against those who instigate a military coup, according to Barutcu. Only the public should decide their country's leaders, and the democratic process is the only way to change government, he argued.

¶8. (SBU) Barutcu said MHP strength comes from supporting the traditional roots of Turkey, noting that in the past the party's core consistency came from central Anatolia; now the party is strong in Ankara, Istanbul, and Izmir as well. The MHP's true constituencies are middle class, hard-working Turks with traditional values, Barutcu claimed.

¶9. (SBU) According to Melen, corruption is the main distinction between his party and AKP. Melen had great hopes for AKP when it entered government in 2002, but he now sees them as corrupt as past governments. In contrast, Melen claims MHP is lead by an honest leader -- Devlet Bahceli -- who is driven by national pride, not personal gain. Melen sees greater transparency for all business transactions as a necessary measure to combat this significant obstacle to

Turkey's development.

¶10. (SBU) Melen envied the ability of Americans to debate sensitive issues; "in the United States you can talk about anything". This is not the case in Turkey, even within academia, according to Melen. While he did not openly advocate eliminating one barrier to free speech in Turkey -- Penal Code Article 301 criminalizing insulting Turkishness -- he was frustrated by the law's censoring effect on debating sensitive issues in Turkey.

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Comment  
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¶11. (SBU) Comment: Warm support for closer relations with the U.S. from senior Istanbul-based MHP representatives was unexpected, reflecting a more positive view of the US than traditional MHP rhetoric would imply. MHP campaigned on a strong anti-American platform in the 2007 national elections (reftel B) and some party members have even accused the US of supporting PKK terrorism. Being based in Istanbul may require these MHPers to moderate their rhetoric; all three stated their party was not "anti-American" and the media was to blame for creating this false impression. Melen admitted his statements in Parliament often draw criticisms from within the party, but noted Bahceli placed him on top of the district candidate ticket in 2002 and 2007, a sign Bahceli is open to descent. MHP's traditional rhetoric is not likely to shift radically, especially with local elections approaching, but it was refreshing to hear a more constructive line from Istanbul representatives.  
OUDKIRK